

STATEMENT

*by the U. S. National Committee
on Vital Health and Statistics*

National Vital Statistics Needs

THE U. S. National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics was requested by the Public Health Service to make a comprehensive study of the objectives and the program of national vital statistics, to report its findings, and to make recommendations with regard to the future development of the program. It was asked, also, to undertake a special study of the needs for marriage statistics and the extent to which existing data satisfy them.

The committee's findings and recommendations are based on:

1. An extensive questionnaire survey of the principal users of the various kinds of vital statistics and a special questionnaire survey of the major users of marriage statistics.

2. Participation in a panel discussion at a

This report was prepared by the Subcommittee on National Vital Statistics Needs: chairman, William G. Cochran, Johns Hopkins University; Harold F. Dorn, Public Health Service; Forrest E. Linder, United Nations; O. K. Sagen, Illinois State Department of Public Health; Mortimer Spiegelman, Metropolitan Life Insurance Co.; P. K. Whelpton, Scripps Foundation for Research in Population Problems, Miami University; Robert F. Lenhart, Committee for Economic Development, Washington, D. C.

A special study of national marriage statistics, the results of which are incorporated in this report, was conducted by the Subcommittee on Utilization of Marriage Statistics: chairman, Conrad Taeuber, Bureau of the Census; Myron S. Silbert, Federated Department Stores, Inc.; Clifford Kirkpatrick, University of Indiana; Ann Dillon, Tennessee State Department of Public Health; Louis Weiner, Board of Governors of Federal Reserve System; Charles B. Reeder, E. I. Dupont De Nemours and Co.

meeting of the American Association of Registration Executives on the subject "A National System of Vital Statistics."

3. Intensive studies of particular phases of the problem.

4. Frequent, long discussion meetings of the subcommittees.

In the detailed report (1), the committee has examined the major areas of responsibility of NOVS and has outlined the goals to be achieved in each area. This is followed by a statement of the principal deficiencies in the present system with respect to these goals and finally by the recommendations.

The Role of NOVS

In this country, the registration of vital events is the responsibility of the States. Each State also has the responsibility for tabulating and publishing its own data so as to meet its special needs. The tabulation and publication of national data on births, deaths, notifiable diseases, marriages, divorces, and annulments are the functions of the National Office of Vital Statistics, a branch of the Division of General Health Services, Bureau of State Services, Public Health Service.

The functions of NOVS should not be regarded as confined to the routine processing and publication of historic series of data. The justification for publishing data is that they serve some useful purpose. Vital statistics are essential for administrative purposes in both business and government and for research. Used in conjunction with population data, they provide a background (a) for public health programs and medical research, (b) for making projections of the size and composition of the

population, and (c) for the study of trends regarding family formation, composition and dissolution, and other aspects of our society. NOVS has major responsibilities both for making available the kind of data that will be most useful in these areas and for stimulating widespread and fruitful application of these data. These responsibilities call for foresight and flexibility to meet changing needs. Further, although many of the uses of vital statistics lie in the field of public health, the data also have important applications to demography.

The fact that NOVS is a part of the Public Health Service insures full recognition of the health interests in vital statistics. This implies an obligation and responsibility to maintain a national vital statistics program that is not overshadowed by health interests but also meets the justifiable needs in the demographic and other areas of interest.

Major Recommendations and Observations

The committee wishes to draw particular attention to the following recommendations which appear to deserve the highest priority:

Immediate priority should be given to the processing and procurement of data so as to achieve a schedule of processing which permits the release for printing of final data within 15 months after the close of the data year, and this schedule should be maintained or improved upon in the future.

Statistical studies that contribute to knowledge in public health, fertility, marriage, divorce, and mortality should be developed as part of the regular program of NOVS. In particular, attention should be given to the influence of population characteristics, such as sex, age, marital status, and occupation. The program should include collection of new data and development of new methods of analysis that are needed for program planning, administration, and research.

NOVS should be given sufficient fiscal resources to provide more adequate technical services to the States in the following areas: professional advisory and consultant service on technical and management problems; expanded information and clearinghouse services on technical subjects and methodology; educational

programs directed toward improvement of source data; national program for recruiting and training professional vital statistics personnel; and work with State health department program divisions in promoting effective utilization of vital statistics data.

The committee has also examined two alternative methods of producing national vital statistics, in particular the use of data pretabulated by the States and of punchcards supplied by the States. Recommendations with regard to these alternatives are as follows:

1. NOVS should reject any data procurement method that limits or restricts the use of vital statistics records for research or that prevents it from controlling the quality of national vital statistics tabulations. Specifically, NOVS should procure transcripts of the individual vital records for processing.

2. NOVS should reject the proposal to produce national vital statistics from data pretabulated by the States because: (a) the available national data would shrink to those obtainable from a minimum rigid list of tabulations; (b) it would become very difficult to make national studies based upon information obtainable only from transcripts of the individual records or from individual punchcards; (c) it would add to the cost of State operations without a compensatory decrease in the cost to NOVS.

3. NOVS should reject the punchcard method of collecting vital statistics data as a general method applicable to all States because: (a) it restricts the freedom of action both of the State offices of vital statistics and of NOVS, thus making vital statistics less useful rather than more useful; (b) effective leadership in national and international vital statistics will be sacrificed because of the loss of technical skills and knowledge in NOVS; (c) the scope and detail of national vital statistics cannot be greater than those of the participating State ranking lowest in these respects; (d) the possible savings in cost are outweighed by the disadvantages of the method; (e) the overlapping of State and Federal vital statistics procedures, tabulations, and needs is not great enough to make this method possible without serious disadvantages to both parties.

4. NOVS should abandon any further experimentation with the punchcard method in the

collection of mortality statistics and, if the use of this method to collect birth statistics is continued at all, should limit it to the few States where it can be shown to be mutually advantageous and where it will not adversely affect the scope, quality, continuity, and usefulness of national vital statistics.

5. NOVS should continue to cooperate with the States in studies of ways to improve the division of labor in the national vital statistics system. Changes in the system should be made only after full consideration of: (a) the basic requirements for national vital statistics; (b) safeguards for the continuity of operation; (c) opportunities to improve the final product and to render maximum services.

The committee also notes that marriage and divorce (including annulment) statistics are in a highly unsatisfactory state as regards geographic coverage, uniformity of reporting, accuracy, and amount of detail. A program for the improvement of these data should be consistent with the above recommendations and receive the same level of priority, but it is recognized that it is not possible to carry out such a program under the present budgetary position. The committee recommends that:

1. NOVS work actively to establish a marriage registration area through implementation of the four criteria established for admission to the area, and to extend it until every State is included. These criteria are: (a) central record files for marriages in the State office containing items on standard record of marriage form; (b) adoption of report form of marriage containing the items on the standard record of marriage form; (c) reporting by all local areas regularly to the State office; (d) agreement between State office and National Office of Vital Statistics on joint testing of reporting for completeness and accuracy.

2. Methods of collecting marriage statistics be explored with a view to assuring (a) complete coverage of the United States, (b) uniform data both between and within States, (c) comparability of time series, and (d) accuracy of information.

3. NOVS obtain copies of marriage records from the States and local areas to be processed in the NOVS.

Similar actions are needed for national sta-

tistics on divorce and annulment. However, specific recommendations are deferred until a thorough study of this problem can be made.

Other Recommendations

Completeness of data: NOVS should stimulate and assist in special studies of birth registration completeness in areas where completeness of registration is still a problem.

NOVS should endeavor to develop methods for measuring incompleteness of death and late fetal death registration adaptable to those areas where this problem is important. If practical techniques can be found, they should be applied to obtain more information on the extent of incompleteness and on means for attaining more complete reporting.

Efforts toward improvement of notifiable disease reporting should be concentrated first on those diseases that are major health problems and are amenable to control procedures.

NOVS should cooperate with the States in the development and application of tests on the completeness of the reporting of marriages, divorces, and annulments to the central offices, and on the accuracy of the information on the report forms.

Uniformity of data: NOVS and the State vital statistics offices should continue their efforts to obtain complete coverage of all items on the standard certificates.

Scope and detail: NOVS should keep in closer touch with the users of its data when planning the scope and detail of its tabulations and publications and when making decisions on fundamental issues.

Explanatory and interpretive text: The analytical functions of NOVS should be strengthened to make available more explanatory and interpretive material useful to consumers.

Cyclical schedule of tabulations: The concept of cyclical collection and tabulation of data should be firmly established as a part of the regular program of NOVS with adequate safeguards in regard to the continuity of the various tabulation cycles.

Use of Vital Statistics

Questionnaires were sent to 369 persons selected for their presumed interest in some

aspect of vital statistics data; replies were received from 254 of them. Although the committee was aware of the limitations of a questionnaire of this type, information was sought regarding the relative frequency with which various types of vital statistics are used and the different sources from which these data are obtained; the extent to which the respondents regard available vital statistics as adequate for their uses; and, ways of reducing the quantity of material published by NOVS and still meeting the important needs of consumers. The results of the questionnaire may be summarized as follows:

Frequency of use of types of data: Mortality and natality statistics are the data issued by the National Office of Vital Statistics which are used most frequently by the persons replying. Next in order of frequency of use are the statistics on marriages and notifiable diseases. The consumers surveyed showed the least interest in fetal death statistics and divorce statistics. This generally corresponds to the requests for data received by NOVS.

Geographic categories used: An overwhelming majority of the consumers surveyed indicated use of statistics for the country as a whole and for States. Also, the majority of respondents appear to have need for data on all of the other geographic areas listed.

Use of State and local publications: Excluding State registrars of vital statistics, relatively little reference appears to be made to State and local publications. However, this may be due, in part, to the composition of the list of persons and agencies surveyed.

Secondary references: Of the secondary references, the Statistical Abstract of the Bureau of the Census is most frequently used, followed by the United Nations Demographic Yearbook and by the World Almanac.

Unpublished data: About one-half of the respondents stated that they have requested unpublished data from NOVS.

Timeliness: The dissatisfaction expressed most frequently and most strongly concerning NOVS publications related to the lack of timeliness of their issuance. The release of unpublished data to those requesting them appears to have softened the reactions of some of the re-

spondents. Considerable understanding and appreciation of the problems faced by NOVS in the early publication of data were evident, but the general opinion was that the data would be much more useful if they could be issued on a more timely schedule.

Accuracy: Most of the respondents did not express any opinion concerning accuracy, except to indicate general satisfaction with the quality of data. Most of the defects mentioned were those that have been already recognized by NOVS, namely, errors in residence allocation of births and deaths, and incompleteness of notifiable disease statistics.

Scope and detail: A large proportion of respondents indicated satisfaction with the existing scope and detail of the published data. There were relatively few suggestions for reducing the quantity of data published.

Use of Marriage Statistics

A second questionnaire devoted exclusively to marriage statistics was sent to 539 persons or agencies to obtain information concerning uses and needs indicated by consumers of marriage statistics. Replies were received from 262, or 49 percent. While one question dealt with potential uses if statistics were available, it is doubtful that the full effect of supply on demand is revealed. Perhaps improved statistics must actually be available in order to call out full expression of demand from consumers.

Since users of marriage statistics were selected as respondents it is to be expected that use would be reported in ways proportionate to the kind of persons included in the mailing list; namely, businessmen, university people, private researchers, and government officials. In the judgment of the committee the mailing list of business users stressed national organizations, and the survey may have failed to reach local users in business fields. Probably, the questionnaire survey was most effective in revealing the varied uses of marriage statistics, in indicating the scope of the desired data, and in eliciting new suggestions.

The four general findings of the survey:

1. There is evidence of extensive use of marriage statistics in large business organizations,

in colleges and universities, in government, and in private research.

2. The returns indicate use by individuals in business organizations for estimating household formation and for predicting demand for consumer goods. Persons in research and academic fields expressed a preference for data useful in sociological and demographic research.

3. With respect to the time-space aspect of statistical reporting, the broader categories were favored. Although there was strong support for monthly totals and for annual national and State reporting of more detailed figures, there seemed to be a relatively limited demand

for reporting of the monthly figures in advance of present publications.

4. Strong support was expressed for complete national and State coverage on an annual basis and for more specific data, with cross-tabulations for bride and groom, and information on items not available from registration records.

REFERENCE

- (1) U. S. National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics, Subcommittee on National Vital Statistics: National vital statistics needs. Vital Statistics—Special Reports, vol. 45, No. 11. U. S. Government Printing Office, 1957.

CDC Laboratory Refresher Training Courses

Laboratory refresher training courses at the Communicable Disease Center, Chamblee, Ga., will be offered during the period September 1957 through March 1958 according to the following schedule:

Laboratory methods in the diagnosis of parasitic diseases:

Part 1. Intestinal parasites. September 9–October 4.

Part 2. Blood parasites. October 7–25.

Laboratory methods in the diagnosis of viral and rickettsial diseases. October 14–25, March 10–21.

Laboratory methods in the diagnosis of rabies. October 28–November 1, March 24–28.

Laboratory methods in medical mycology—cutaneous, subcutaneous, and systemic fungi. January 6–24.

Laboratory methods in the diagnosis of tuberculosis. January 20–31.

Laboratory methods in the study of pulmonary mycoses. February 3–14.

Laboratory methods in the diagnosis of bacterial diseases:

Part 1. General bacteriology. February 10–21.

Part 2. General bacteriology. February 24–March 7.

Laboratory diagnostic methods in veterinary mycology. February 24–28.

Laboratory methods in the diagnosis of bacterial diseases—enteric bacteriology. March 10–21.

Serologic methods in the diagnosis of parasitic and mycotic infections. March 10–21.

By special arrangement the following courses will be offered:

Laboratory methods in the diagnosis of malaria.

Special training in virus techniques.

Typing of *Corynebacterium diphtheriac*.

Special problems in enteric bacteriology.

Phage typing of *Salmonella typhosa*.

Laboratory methods in the diagnosis of leptospirosis.

Serologic differentiation of streptococci.

Bacteriophage typing of staphylococci.

Information and application forms should be requested from the Laboratory Branch, Communicable Disease Center, Public Health Service, P. O. Box 185, Chamblee, Ga.

technical publications

Film Reference Guide for Medicine and Allied Sciences

PHS Publication No. 487. June 1956. 51 pages. 45 cents.

This guide is designed to provide members of the Interdepartmental Committee on Medical Training Aids, as well as film users outside ICMTA member agencies, with a ready reference to selected medical films and to where they may be obtained.

Publication numbers for other ICMTA members are: Air Force, AFP 160-15-1; Army, DA Pamphlet 108-2; Navy, NAV MED P 5042; Veterans Administration, Catalog 7. Copies can be obtained from the Card Division, Library of Congress, Washington 25, D. C.

Communicable Disease Center

Report of activities, 1954-55

PHS Publication No. 521. 1957. 63 pages; illustrated.

This report on the major activities of the Communicable Disease Center, Bureau of State Services, Public Health Service, summarizes the accomplishments of CDC's several organizational components during the fiscal year 1955. It is also intended to aid State, local, and other health agencies in planning their programs.

The work reported has been divided into broad categories corresponding to the Center's pattern of operation and reveals the scope, nature, and interrelationships of activities carried on by the combined staff. It covers such areas as epidemic and disaster aid, epidemiological surveillance, field and laboratory investigations of specific diseases and disease vectors, and development of diagnostic procedures.

It describes special operational services given the States in the form of consultations, demonstrations, program reviews and laboratory diagnostic and reference services, as well as training programs for laboratory and field work and the production of audiovisual and other aids.

A bibliography of articles published by CDC staff members and their collaborators during late 1954 and 1955 is appended. Titles are arranged according to subject matter so that readers can select articles dealing with their special fields of interest.

Sanitary Engineering Aspects of the Atomic Energy Industry

U. S. Atomic Energy Commission Publication No. TID-7517, parts Ia and Ib, October 1956. 957 pages. \$3.10.

This publication, in two parts, contains reports presented at a seminar sponsored by the Atomic Energy Commission and the Public Health Service, held at the Robert A. Taft Engineering Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, December 6-9, 1955.

Part Ia presents technical data from unclassified AEC papers concerned with radioactive waste disposal problems of interest to public health agencies and to sanitary engineers.

Part Ib includes technical data contributed by Public Health Service participants. Public Health Service interests, contributions, activities, and technical and administrative aspects of environmental health problems of the atomic energy industry are considered.

As a whole, the publication presents the advantages, limitations, comparative hazard, and the present most promising approaches to radioactive waste disposal problems attendant on broadening the atomic

energy industry into peaceful uses by testing ideas and proposals presented in terms of possible public attitudes. Also discussed is the responsibility of public officials for regulating the industry so that the hazard to the public may remain within acceptable limits, without impeding practical applications of nuclear energy.

Copies are available from the Office of Technical Services, Department of Commerce, Washington 25, D. C.

Workshops for the Disabled

A vocational rehabilitation resource

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Publication. Rehabilitation Service Series No. 371. 1956. 167 pages. 60 cents.

Prepared by leading rehabilitation and workshop authorities, this publication is designed to familiarize the reader with the origin and nature of the services afforded by various types of workshops and some of the problems they face.

The bulletin traces some of the developments of different kinds of shops under diverse auspices. It attempts to show how such shops can be resources for many of the services necessary for the vocational rehabilitation of persons having substantial employment handicaps.

This section carries announcements of all new Public Health Service publications and of selected new publications on health topics prepared by other Federal Government agencies.

Publications for which prices are quoted are for sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington 25, D. C. Orders should be accompanied by cash, check, or money order and should fully identify the publication. Public Health Service publications which do not carry price quotations, as well as single sample copies of those for which prices are shown, can be obtained without charge from the Public Inquiries Branch, Public Health Service, Washington 25, D. C.

The Public Health Service does not supply publications issued by other agencies.
